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LITERATURE À LA CARTE

JOHN B. OPDYCKE

Dining is a physical job.

Dining *à la carte* is an open job.

Dining *table d'hôte* is a blind-alley job.

If the present shortage in the European food supply has reduced the pageantry of dining over there, then certainly it is not an unmixed evil.

The Continental *table d'hôte* system used to be the one best argument for fasting; it still is if it still *is*.

Three years ago *table d'hôting* on the Continent was a ceremony—an intricate and elaborate form of culinary worship that was not only military in its administration, but also well-nigh martial in its execution.

From the anchovies to the *crème de menthe (vert, frappé)* the diner was kept ever conscious of the system. Not for a moment was he allowed to forget the lockstep mastication superimposed by the management of his *pension*. His good digestion (what paradox!) waited not on appetite, but on ritual. His menu was the be-all and the end-all of his craving for nourishment. Dining for him was become a fetish of formula; eating, a syncopated symphony as a matter of course—as a matter of many courses. His retinue of viands was served *à la rag*.

What then was more natural than that syncopated music and syncopated dancing should develop as accompaniments to syncopated feeding?

Whatever may be the doubts as to the priority in time of the egg and the chicken, there can be no doubt but that the cabaret is the legitimate child of the *table d'hôte*. It is but the echo of collective gormandizing, the consciousness of chewing set *en tempo*, the inevitable tintinnabulation of the music as it wells from the chorus of *table d'hôte*rs, the rhythmic reverberations of gastric gratification in the blissful, if blatant, consciousness of its bellyhood. Such was the distinguished origin of the grabaway cabaret!

A bell rings! A chord is struck! In march the stewards to a stately air bearing high the viands of the first despair. They may not go, they may not come again, until the chief rings his bell, the musicianers strike their chord, and the stewards mark time in perfect unison. Even unto the fifteenth and twentieth generations of a single dinner is the ceremony visited in exactly the same manner, at exactly the same time per course per day, to exactly the same people. No mere mortal of a diner dares to be late, or the whole domestic machinery may be thrown out of gear and a conference of heads, from the scrubberial to the managerial, be necessitated. The culprit responsible for such a calamity should be made the subject of national scorn. For a mere diner to abstain from this viand or that were sufficient cause for exile to Siberia! At a certain hour the people throughout an empire must eat fish. At a certain time every day the emperor of a kingdom must be able to say to the dining members of his dining council, "Behold, at this moment my subjects are *demi tassing!*"

Discipline! Discipline in matters masticatory as in matters military! Discipline in matters intestinal as in matters international! Discipline in matters palatable as in matters political! Discipline!

The pompous parade of provender moves apace.

With many people the *table d'hôte* has become more than a habit; it has become a state of mind.

The Teutonic military method is a phase of *table d'hôte* frenzy.

And this prevalence of the *table d'hôte* tendency is not surprising when it is remembered that, though efficient as a system, it is nevertheless a very lazy, a very convenient, and therefore a very human way of getting a job done.

By this system the kitchen force of a establishment tells a man what, when, where, and how he must eat. He has to think about nothing whatever—nothing, that is, but a bill at the conclusion of the exercise, a tip after that, and perhaps, *probably*, some equatorial discomfort later on.

But *table d'hôteing* is distinctly an adult process. It presupposes a sophistication in digestive operation, a tolerance in digestive receptiveness, a cosmopolitanism in digestive grasp, that the organism of a child could not possibly be possessed of.

Glutton though a child may be, he nevertheless objects to having his gluttony library-bureaued. The love of selection is a predominant quality of childhood and adolescence. Apportionment that is satisfactory to a young person is a miracle. More, apportionment made for children by adults that is appropriate and wholesome is as rare as it is miraculous.

Youth is the *à la carte* period of life; adulthood, the *table d'hôte* period. But the one is always trying to impose his point of view upon the other, and the adult, being the stronger and the one in authority, usually prevails to the greater degree, oftentimes to his own embarrassment and undoing.

Freedom of choice as well as freedom in choice belongs pre-eminently to youth, and this is so, must be so, even though the very exercise of freedom may bring pain and cause trouble subsequently.

If *table d'hôte*ing you would go,
Your appetite must be just so;
If *à la carte* you masticate,
Your appetite may fluctuate.

Adults are *just-so* people; children are fluctuators.

The regular, laid-out, cut-and-dried *table d'hôte* perpetuates a monotony of status in the nether physical regions and allows but narrow margins for wholesome contractions and expansions. It holds to a monarchical régime; it assumes assimilation by royal command.

The free, fluctuating, catch-as-catch-can *à la carte* is as elastic in its possibilities as the digestive organism of youth itself. It is accordingly democratic. It assumes nothing; indeed, it often entails anarchy, revolution, and bombastication of the in'ards! But then—to be free!

A syllabus is an educational *table d'hôte*, an adult concoction the ingredients for which are assembled, mixed, and served for the mental digestion of the young.

A curriculum is a collection of syllabi; in other words, a mobilization of educational *table d'hôtes*.

A school is the battlefield of the contending forces—the place where adult prescription contends with juvenile tactic, where *table d'hôte* preparedness and *à la carte* maneuver fight it out,

where strategy in storage and strategy on the spur out do themselves in combat.

The conceit of adulthood is nowhere more apparent, nowhere more assertive, than in its formulation of studies for the young. It *lays out* what it thinks pupils ought to study, how it thinks youth ought to study, and then tries to force the issue. It disregards to an astounding degree the things youth wants. It strangely enough forgets its own *à la carte* period in its *table d'hôte* maturity. And thus it renders the educational fare administered both unpalatable and indigestible.

Color, motion, animals, plants, objects, pictures, contests, contrasts, freedom, *yeas*—it is these youth would order from an *à la carte* menu in education.

Compliance, exactness, abstraction, sameness, inflexibility, nicety, books, words, don'ts, *nays*—it is these adults serve up on their *table d'hôte* menu in education.

Algebra, history, grammar, and, worst of all, cut-and-dried, *table d'hôte* reading—these canned products, these indigestibles, these ptomaines for the adolescent passionists and *à la cartists*! Give them liberty or give them these!

There is consequently a wholesale foundering and a complete set of hospital schools—schools for defectives, for atypicals, for waywards, for arrested developments, and so on.

Next in order of establishment must be schools for the haters of reading.

Reading is a mental and emotional job.

Reading *à la carte* is an open job.

Reading *table d'hôte* is a blind-alley job.

It is with the reading laid out for the young that the syllabists, the educational *table d'hôte*rs, do the greatest harm.

Not liking an edible is the best reason in the world for not eating it.

Not liking a book is the best reason in the world for not reading it.

But certain books must be read for discipline, say the *table d'hôte*rs, and so they prescribe *adult* books and recommend *adult* methods for their treatment in the classroom.

More than this—they follow out the *table d'hôte* régime to the last measure of its syncopating possibilities. Certain books are read and studied at certain specified times and in certain specified ways. It is easy to find whole statefuls of children analyzing the same poem at the same time in the same way—and concluding it with the same dislike! Not so very long ago a somewhat distinguished state superintendent said, pointing to a clock in his office, "Thirty-five thousand children at this present moment are answering this question."

He pointed to a question on the examination paper in his hand which read as follows: "Why did Godfrey Cass desert Molly Ferran?"

Thus were thirty-five thousand in the prime of life led to dabble with the crime of life as a result of the educational *table d'hôte* by which they had been victimized.

That theory that extols study primarily as discipline is extremely pluperfect; it is held only by the most pronounced *table d'hôte* thinkers. To study something just because it will do you good is to take castor oil intellectually or psychologically, or both. Put into practice in the study of literature, such a theory acts as a chronic emetic. Pupils in the higher elementary grades and in the high school need the literature that they like, need literature *à la carte* if they are to have any permanent benefit from it or liking for it.

There are three attitudes among pupils of these grades toward literature and reading. The majority do not like the books they are given to read. Some are keen to read books other than those used in the classroom. A few resign themselves and read thoroughly, if not keenly, the prescribed books.

In other words:

Some hae meat and canna eat,
And some would eat that want it;
But we have meat and we can eat,
And sae the Lord be thankit.

What is meat for one may be poison for another.

Literature *à la carte* will enable all to have the meat they like and are able to digest and enjoy.

Dr. Corson of Cornell proved years ago that the one best method of inculcating a genuine love for literature, as far as college students and adults are concerned, is the *à la carte* method—the reading aloud of the best prose and poetry to large groups.

Professor Copeland of Harvard is today proving the same method to be supreme—witness the attendance upon his readings and the after-attack upon the libraries.

The very same method may be used with high-school pupils, is being used with them in certain schools, with results that are vastly superior to those under the old *table d'hôte* system. Large bodies of pupils—sometimes as many as two and three hundred—are assembled two or three times a week. Literature of *their age* is read to them, along with the high spots—the youthful spots—in their prescribed books. There is no close analysis, no high-brow discussion such as the suburban Browning Society indulges when it meets of an evenin' to “do” Browning's *The Ring and the Book*.

The aims simply are to inculcate a human attitude toward literature and a natural, wholesome, sincere appreciation of it.

The means simply are the auditory appeal, the principle of mob psychology, and great discernment in the selection and grouping of readings.

Most of the literature pupils are required to read is too remote from their experience, too far removed from their point of view, too difficult for their mental digestion. The *à la carte* plan makes it possible for them to start on a simple, native fare and to work up gradually to a more complex, more ambitious menu.

Thus, “Casey at the Bat” may be an excellent beginning for a group of readings that deal with the subject of rivalry or contest, a subject always near to the heart of youth. This may be followed with Fred Emerson Brooks's “Old Ace”; this, in turn, with “How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix,” and “The Chariot Race” from *Ben Hur*; and the series may be fitly concluded with “Pheidippides.”

This last is not always an easy poem for young people; it is not always, indeed, a likable poem. But placed at the conclusion of such a series it has been found to work marvels with those very pupils who could not have been reached by it except through some

such association. They are soon able to see that certain elements in the make-up of "Casey" were exemplified centuries ago in his Greek ancestor. On one definite occasion, after reading "Pheidippides" in this connection, they stormed the librarian for more "Marathon pomes."

From some such starting-point it is an easy matter to get pupils to initiate their own reading groups, their "squads of stories and poems." They are able to construct an *à la carte* menu in literature that is far better for their emotional enjoyment and intellectual nourishment than much of the stuff served up by their adult benefactors and well-wishers.

In one large *en masse* group of pupils it was found that seventeen different nationalities were represented. It was suggested that poems or short stories fairly representative of these different nationalities be procured and read. The result was most gratifying and inspiring. *Mother Goose* was present in many dialects and languages. Fairies, harpies, elves, trolls, kelpies, brownies, nixies, pixies, hobgoblins, urchins, and a host of other "invisibles" from various lands were likewise on hand. It was a promiscuous assembly of literary stars that entertained the group for two or three meetings, but the effects were pleasing and instructive beyond all anticipation.

A few of the other groups that have been worked out with excellent results are here set down. Each group was calculated to cover about an hour, but, as the titles will indicate, the work frequently ran over the allotted time.

A GROUP OF SEA POETRY

Kingsley's "The Three Fishers"
 Clough's "Where Lies the Land"
 Miller's "Columbus"
 Proctor's "The Sea"
 Masfield's "Ships" and "Sea Fever"
 Cunningham's "A Sea Song"
 Longfellow's "The Wreck of the Hesperus"
 Tennyson's "Break, Break, Break"

A GROUP OF BABY POETRY

George Macdonald's "Baby"
 Alfred Austin's "Mother-Song"

Swinburne's "Etude Realiste"
 Holland's "Babyhood"
 Riley's "The Way the Baby Woke" and "The Way the Baby Slept"
 Samuel Minturn Peck's "My Little Girl"
 Selections from Josephine Preston Peabody and Robert Louis Stevenson

A GROUP OF ANIMAL POETRY

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "To Flush, My Dog"
 Arnold's "Geist's Grave"
 Foley's "A Friend"
 Browning's "Tray"
 Trowbridge's "The Vagabonds"
 Guiterman's "The Legend of the First Cam-u-el" and others
 Byron's "Inscription on the Monument of a Newfoundland Dog"
 Gray's "On a Favorite Cat"

ONOMATOPOETIC POETRY

Poe's "The Bells" and "The Raven"
 Browning's "Thru the Metidja to Abd-El-Kadr"
 Hood's "Miss Kilmansegg" (the conclusion—"Gold")
 Lanier's "Song of the Chattahoochee"
 Noyes's "The Barrel Organ"
 Riley's "Knee Deep in June" and others
 Selections from Wells's *Nonsense Anthology*

AN HOUR WITH EUGENE FIELD

(Typical of "hours" with many poets and prose writers)

In Memoriam
 The Ballad of the Phillaloo
 In Memoriam of Mary Jane
 Love's Sacrifice
 A Leap Year Proposal
 To Emma Abbott
 Remorse
 The False Orlando
 A Story with an Awful Moral
 Casey's Table d'Hôte

WAR STORIES

Alphonse Daudet's "The Last Lesson"
 Percy Godfrey Savage's "Somewhere in Belgium"
 Joseph Hall's "N.B."
 Hornell Hart's "The Forced March"
 Prosper Merimee's "The Taking of the Redoubt"
 Kipling's "The Drums of the Fore and Aft"
 George Cary Eggleston's "A Breach of Etiquette"
 De Maupassant's "La Mere Sauvage"

BUSINESS STORIES

- Edna Ferber's "The Self Starter"
 Frank M. O'Brien's "Master of His Art"
 Chap. iii in Frank Norris' *The Pit*
 Redfield Ingalls' "Business and Ethics"
 Henry Murger's "The Passage of the Red Sea"
 Thomas F. Hoynes's "The Ego of the Metropolis" (newspaper)
 Ludovic Halevy's "My Nephew Joseph" (newspaper)
 Selections from Jack Lait's *Beef, Iron and Wine* (newspaper)

CHRISTMAS STORIES

- Mary N. Murfree's "His Christmas Miracle" in *The Road of the Guerilla*
 W. J. Locke's "A Christmas Mystery"
 Thomas Bailey Aldrich's "A Christmas Phantasy"
 O. Henry's "A Chaparral Christmas Gift"
 Selections from Jack Lait's *Beef, Iron and Wine*
 Selections from Dickinson's *Children's Book of Christmas Stories*, such as,
 Grace Margaret Gallagher's "The Queerest Christmas"; Olive Thome
 Miller's "Christmas under the Snow," and others

CAT STORIES

- Virginia West's "The Cat That Came Back"
 Wilbur Daniel Steele's "The Yellow Cat"
 Marcel Prevost's "The Woman and the Cat"
 Selections from Mary E. Wilkins-Freeman's *Understudies*
 Kipling's "The Maltese Cat"

DOG STORIES

- Selections from John Muir's *Stickeen*
 Selections from Alfred Ollivant's *Bob, Son of Battle*
 Selections from Eleanor Atkinson's *Grayfriars Bobby*
 Selections from Ouida's *A Dog of Flanders*
 Selections from Brown's *Rab and His Friends*
 John A. Moroso's "Buddy and Waffles"
 Francis Gregg's "Whose Dog—?"
 Chap. iii in Jack London's *Call of the Wild*
 Richard Harding Davis' "Love Me, Love My Dog" (from *Van Bibber*)
 Selections from Mark Twain's "A Dog's Tale"
 Thomas Bailey Aldrich's "Goliath" (From *Two Bites at a Cherry*)
 Harry C. Goodwin's "The Bad Man"
 John Galsworthy's "Memories"

STORIES OF RIVALRY

- Richard Harding Davis' "Mr. Travers' First Hunt" (From *Van Bibber*)
 From Dickens' *Pickwick Papers*, "Mr. Winkle on Skates" and "Mr. Winkle
 Goes Gunning"

From Lew Wallace's *Ben Hur* "The Chariot Race"

Chap. xv in Henry A. Shute's *Plucky*

Contests in marksmanship such as, the archery contest in *Ivanhoe* and the shooting contest in *The Last of the Mohicans*

SCHOOL STORIES

Josephine Meyer's "The Green C—"

Any chapter or chapters from Kate Douglas Wiggin's *The Story of Patsy*

Selections from Kipling's *Stalkey and Co.*

Chap. i in Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

Selections from Dickens' *Nicholas Nickleby*

Latter part of chapter vi in Hughes' *Tom Brown's School Days*

Chap. ix in Dickens' *Oliver Twist*

Chap. ii in Mitchell's *Hugh Wynne*

"The Cuff Doblin Fight" in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*

"The Hanky School" in *Sentimental Tommy*

Chap. v in Kate Douglas Wiggin's *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*

DRESS STORIES

Chap. viii in Kate Douglas Wiggin's *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*

Ethel M. Kelley's "Making over Mary"

Fannie Kilbourne's "Being like Nita"

Katherine Kingsley Crosby's "The Pink Slipper"

TRAIN STORIES

Selections from Booth Tarkington's *Great K. and A. Train Robbery*

Selections from Webster's *Calumet K*

Frank W. Tuttle's "On the Local Express"

O. Henry's "The Hiding of Black Bill"

Lynn Roby Meekins' "Freckles"

In addition to these the best chapters or sections from all the required books are read as above indicated. What adult outside of the *table d'hôte* class reads *Ivanhoe* through today? There are about ten chapters in the novel that are enjoyable and helpful for *en masse* treatment. The rest of the story is negligible except for purposes of plot connection. These salients are served up *à la carte*, as are likewise the best parts of *Silas Marner*, *The Sketch Book*, *The House of the Seven Gables*, *The Tale of Two Cities*, *Sir Roger DeCoverley*, and the rest.

Poe's dictum regarding mere length in a piece of literature bears with particular significance upon the reading aloud of a story or a poem or a play. The longer works are all *à-la-cartable*

for purposes of adolescent consumption and are really the better for such cutting. The pulsating passages only must be read. If less throbbing passages get read too, well and good; it not, also well and good.

The intensive study of a literature classic never begets an intensive appreciation of that classic. It frequently begets an intensive hatred. If called upon to parse Milton's *Paradise Lost*, one may get certain satisfactions out of it by way of calling God a mere noun or by pointing out that such a disagreeable thing as a participle may modify the Devil. But there are no other satisfactions in such a study, and certainly there are no benefits to be derived from it.

But there is a free and wholesome contagion that follows from the *à la carte, en masse* plan of presenting the gems of literature. And the results are vastly more permanent and impressive, even though they do sometimes come by the "doggerel" route. The laughs are bigger and grander; the "weeps" are deeper and wetter, and all of the emotions between the two are truer and more spontaneous by virtue of the plan and the situation. Incidentally, the arrangement is economical, for one good reader may do the work of four or five teachers. (This may be why some of them call it literature *in mess*!)

It is said that literature is a thing of the spirit.

It may be said, then, that examinations are a thing of the flesh.

Who of the flesh shall attempt to examine with success into the things of the spirit therefore?

Verily, the books that pupils love, neither God nor man can fail them in; and the books they do not love, surely no one wants to pass them in.

As well examine a Continental diner closely on the food values and constituencies of his *table d'hôte* as to examine a child on the book he has read. It is safe to leave digestion to itself if the dinner has been wholesome.

Children no longer love bad literature (if there can be such a paradoxical thing). They no longer wallow in the slime of the penny dreadfuls. "Nick Carter" is dead and done with—Glory be! The better literary fare has been supplied so cheaply and so

abundantly that it is almost safe to say that a child may read anything.

Better than all is the fact that children do not love the seamy sex stuff that even educators serve up to them. A teacher who has done the *en masse* work in literature in a large high school for two years, and who has received hundreds of requests to read certain selections, has never yet been asked to read a tainted bit, has never even been asked about literature of that sort. On the other hand, he has read to large groups of girls passages of questionable delicacy from the prescribed books without any unpleasant reactions whatever and without the slightest tendency toward misinterpretation.

Queer, by the way, that the reading recommended by the *table d'hôte* adults for the young should have *to a book* something objectionable in them, usually on the sex problem.

Queer, too, that in the *à la carte* treatment of literature in high school this phase does not present itself at all?

No. The explanation is just exactly the difference between the two systems of dining.

The *table d'hôte* system is narrow and confined and bigoted and artificial; it makes the market wait upon its form and formula; its variety is limited by tradition; its scope, by season and locality. It seeks out food types and plays them up always in the same dress. It thrives upon the storage-houses of the world.

The *à la carte* system, on the other hand, is free and fresh and eclectic; wide-range in its choice; appetizing in its variety; waits upon markets and seasons and localities the whole world over and draws from them accordingly. It seeks out individual delicacies and plays them up. It thrives upon the gardens of the world.

Now, there may be some exaggeration in all this comparison, kind reader, but it is only the exaggeration of the truth; it is not by any means a manufacture from the whole cloth. And for corrective purposes it is as justifiable an exaggeration as is that of the microscope, the telescope, or the X-ray.